Change and the Operational Commander

By JAY M. PARKER

Everything old is new again. Throughout our history the military has faced the impact of technology, international upheaval, and domestic imperatives. The horse gave way to the tank and airplane, and a continental military became a forward deployed superpower. Guns and butter were replaced by the peace dividend. Now cold warriors are asked to serve as peacekeepers.[1] This has significant implications for operational commanders.

U.S. Navy (Ted Saloïs)

Lieutenant Colonel Jay M. Parker, USA, is an academy professor and director of the international relations program in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point.

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Commanders from theater level down serve at the crossroads of change. They perform the key role of identifying the need for change and advising the senior leadership on how to respond. But most importantly, they ensure those responses are then implemented. To do this, commanders introduce innovative doctrine and technology. They must adapt the existing force to new missions, organizations, and equipment while offering timely and accurate feedback to superiors. They must grow the future force and its leadership. Finally, as warfighters, they must face the ultimate test of leading the force in battle.[2]

Commanders must swim against the tide—both individual and institutional—that has often frustrated those who attempt to adapt forces to the challenges of a new era. The personal stakes are high, but the cost of failure is much greater. At Manassas and Pearl Harbor, in Korea as well as Desert One, we paid the price for being unprepared. Although many studies chart how the military responds to change at the macro level, the following article deals with the operational level, using theories of organizational behavior, communication, and psychology to ascertain the barriers and how to overcome them.[3]

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Understanding Change

Two facts serve as competing forces in the process of change. The first is that change is the only true constant. The second is that individuals and organizations routinely deny this reality in the belief that the status quo is permanent and desirable. The inertia of this denial must contend with the impetus of change. Also debate over change is often misdirected. At issue is not whether change should occur. Ultimately, no effective barrier exists. There are, however, many barriers to *effective* change. The difference is found in the outcome. Organizations in general and the military in particular either emerge stronger or are defeated and replaced.

Two social scientists who surveyed the body of literature on innovation, communication, and individual and organizational dimensions of change distilled definitions that help to probe the role of operational commanders as implementors of change. First, they defined social change as "the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system.... Change occurs when a new idea's use or rejection has an effect."[4] Compared with the description of detailed change types, the two step *contingent decision* requiring prior innovation decision is the most suited to change in the military. The initial decision is an *authority decision*, made by the senior leadership and requiring action by subordinates, regardless of their opinion on the mandated change.[5] The subsequent decision by subordinates to implement the leadership's decision also is, strictly speaking, an authority decision. It differs from the first in that the subordinate (in this case an operational commander) must implement decisions, though he remains somewhat autonomous.

Another analyst derived six major motives for change in the military, namely, technology, budgeting, interservice rivalry, leadership, intraorganizational group conflict, and the impact of the international security environment.[6] But these motives are normally above a commander's level of control; he mainly affects change through advisory input to policymakers. Commanders are, however, responsible for initiating contingency decisions to ensure the diffusion of innovation.[7]

The force modernization initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s illustrate both how this occurs and its consequences. With new systems came changes in force structure, maintenance, logistics, and contingency planning. The Abrams tank and Bradley fighting vehicle significantly enhanced the firepower available to heavy task force commanders. The ability of armored forces to shoot on the move and the arrival of an improved antiarmor standoff capability for mechanized infantry were matched by force structure changes at unit level that upgraded the concentration and control of firepower on the battlefield. They were also complimented by the modernization of field artillery, air defenses, attack helicopters, and other capabilities, as well as combat, combat support, and combat service support assets.

But with the new technologies and organizations came challenges. Simple systems became complex, and complex systems required complex maintenance and repairs. Both the Abrams and Bradley required a logistics capability that could refit and refuel forward while keeping up with the new high speed vehicles. Task force commanders, who once might have focused only on the low technology of infantry riflemen and tanks that had changed little since World War II, had to train, maintain, sustain, and fight a complex array of weapons and support systems.[8]

The Gulf War further illustrated the demands changes place on operational commanders. Viewed as a triumph of technology and force rebuilding, this conflict also showed the limitations of some changes. For example, the flood of information available complicated the commander's

task and had unintended consequences by diminishing control. "The constant pressure of the data stream," Eliot Cohen has observed, "together with the growth of nighttime operations, means that leaders try to keep on top of events at the cost of sleep and acuity." It also complicates readiness and training. Overdependence on futuristic capabilities and detailed information risks the inability to operate without them. The high-tech Goliath could be easy prey for a low-tech David. "Future warriors," Cohen noted, "may paradoxically find themselves all the more at a loss when the real world differs sharply from a familiar cyberworld." [9]

While on the surface it is possible to isolate individual elements such as technology which lead to change, seemingly distinct elements of change are frequently interrelated. For example, the defense buildup that made the Abrams and the Bradley possible was related to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and other international shifts. Increases in defense spending since the late 1970s enabled the Armed Forces to keep up with technology. At the same time, interservice rivalry took a turn. Pressures to increase interoperability mounted after the failure of Desert One, the hostage rescue mission in Iran, and escalated in the wake of Urgent Fury, the Grenada invasion. Confused planning as well as incompatible communication and fire support systems led Congress to mandate a series of initiatives in joint doctrine, planning, training, and personnel policies.[10]

Halsey demonstrates one of the greatest barriers to change—personal beliefs and instincts

Commanders—burdened by dramatic changes in weaponry—had greater responsibility for integrating the capabilities of other services into planning and operations. The competition to find quality officers for their units was complicated by requirements to assign those same individuals to crucial joint billets. Outstanding officers could no longer secure their futures by following the path of their parent service.

Budget fluctuations have also brought challenges of downsizing units and limited training funds. Traditional military leadership has been stressed by dramatic changes in the social makeup of the force. Over the last twenty years, leaders have had to adjust their units to the all-volunteer force, more married personnel, greater opportunities for women, and a change from traditional war on isolated battlefields to humanitarian assistance under the scrutiny of television cameras.

Operational commanders cannot defer responsibility for making initial authority decisions to the senior leaders. Nor can they assume that a single order will suffice.[11] Implementing such change at their level means understanding, initiating, and following through on a range of complex actions. These changes are not without precedent. The Soviet military was decimated by Stalin's purges and suffered defeat early in World War II. But it was rebuilt in the midst of war and then overcame powerful German forces.[12] At the same time, the French military—badly demoralized and almost vanquished in World War I—was transformed into one of the largest and most modern forces. Yet it was crushed in a matter of weeks in 1940.[13] If the motives for change are present, and if failing to implement effective responses to change risks national disaster, why do militaries not implement effective change and how much of this failure is the responsibility of commanders?

The Individual

Admiral William ("Bull") Halsey was a visionary. When other surface warriors balked at the idea of naval airpower, he saw it as part of the future. A qualified aviator, he gambled his career on carrier warfare. His subordinates at Midway feared the cost of his absence and worried that surface warrior Raymond Spruance would not understand how to best employ this new weapons system.[14] But at Leyte Halsey's instinct was that of a traditional surface warrior, not an aviator. He left the invasion force behind and went on in search of a battleship engagement. His experience demonstrates one of the greatest barriers to change—personal beliefs and instincts.

Often the most difficult task is discarding the frameworks that we create to explain and deal with daily life. As Walter Lippmann wrote:

The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it.[15]

Lippmann's argument is at odds with the classic "rational actor" view of decisionmaking. That theory contends that rational decisions can be made by objectively bringing all relevant information to bear on the problem and comparing, first, the "relative effectiveness of alternative means for achieving the goal," then "effects on values other than those that would be fulfilled by achieving the immediate end," and finally by alternative ends in light of costs "in terms of other values." [16] This efficient model provides an optimal outcome; but students of the process of decisionmaking side with

Lippmann more than with the rational actor model. The post World War II "cognitive revolution" in social psychology resulted in a wide range of studies illuminating human behavior in general and decisionmaking in particular. Some detail the obstacles which operational commanders must overcome in their own decisionmaking and in that of their subordinates.

Individuals do not usually approach decisionmaking objectively and comprehensively. People are limited in the amount of information they can process. They develop sometimes naive theories based on experience and longstanding beliefs. When decisions arise, particularly crises, these theories are an individual's default setting. Such cognitive shortcuts are a means of making inferences and decisions with minimal time and energy.[17]

Individuals interpret specific situations in light of more general stored knowledge. They make judgments about events, people, or objects by quickly placing them into *a priori* categories. These economical verdicts guide the retrieval and storage of mental information and fill in missing or ambiguous data with "default values." In brief, information is processed from the top down based on preconceived theories structured to organize and explain the world rather than the harsh realities of new data.[18] In the face of barriers, change is slow and incremental at best. Individuals may go so far as to shut down the evaluation process and come to premature mental "closure" rather than contend with complex decisions.

militaries are subject to unique constraints when they attempt to institute changes

What does this mean for operational commanders and their subordinates? When faced with a crisis decision, existing beliefs and theories will take over as they did in Halsey's case at Leyte Gulf. The results can be positive. Arguably, MacArthur's bold move at Inchon was the result of invoking his long held and consistently exercised theories about maneuver warfare. By the same token, his failure to grasp post-World War II realities led to his inability to understand the global political dimensions of the Korean War and his confrontation with Truman.

"We professional soldiers are traditionally laggard in facing and adopting changes," James Gavin wrote in 1947, "especially radical changes that upset proven methods and the ways in which we have been doing things for years past."[19] Lieutenant General Gavin was clearly an exception to his own rule. Tapped for future greatness, Gavin rose from captain in 1941 to major general and command of the 82d Airborne Division in 1944. Like many of his contemporaries, he was an outstanding leader who successfully implemented changes needed to transform the small, outdated regular Army of the 1930s into the complex, modern force which triumphed during World War II. One of the first officers to volunteer for airborne duty, he was responsible for developing airborne doctrine, training embryonic airborne units, and then leading them in battle from Sicily to Berlin.[20] Later, serving on the Army Staff, he continued to be an innovator. He initiated the development of helicopter tactics, modern missile artillery, and space age technology. He was also an early critic of American military operations in Vietnam.[21] Gavin and many members of his generation who advocated and implemented change exhibited many of the positive characteristics of innovators and "early adopters." They had intelligence and a favorable attitude toward risk and change, and also sought information about innovation, pursued education, and were far less dogmatic.[22]

There are notable exceptions, but the nonrigidity of these officers might have resulted from the fact that many were junior and had seen little or no combat in World War I. The experiences and analogies of that war had limited value for them. Those like Patton, who had been in combat, focused on the innovations that might have broken the bloody stalemate on the Western Front.[23] Eisenhower's goal in Europe was to avoid "the long, dreary, and wasteful battles that bled Europe white in World War I."[24] Gavin's recognition of barriers to change and his skills as an innovator were not always sufficient. In the 1950s he and others faced opposition from the senior civilian and military leadership.[25] Once commanders on the operational level overcome barriers, they must challenge the collective and interactive responses from other quarters within their organizations.

The Organization

The task of changing an organization depends on its type. Militaries are best understood as bureaucracies. The word *bureaucracy* conjures images that are antitheses of precision, efficiency, and professionalism in an ideal military. Yet virtually every definition of bureaucracy refers to the makeup and operation of the military. When Max Weber wrote his classic work on bureaucracy, he selected the military as his model. As bureaucracies, militaries are subject to unique limitations and constraints on large, hierarchical organizations when they attempt to institute changes.[26]

"Organizations, like individuals, are reluctant to accept any change in their environments—whether good or bad—as permanent," notes Anthony Downs, "if such acceptance would

USS Wisconsin firing Tomahawk missile.

U.S. Navy

B–2 stealth bomber.

U.S. Air Force

require them to make a significant alteration in their customary behavior patterns."[27] This bureaucratic inertia is not only understandable, it is beneficial. A bureaucracy is, by definition, a government agency with a public trust. Success or failure has a broader public impact than the profits or losses of a private corporation. Thus stability mitigates risk. Risk for the military is literally a life and death proposition. But the reverse can also be true; failure to change increases risk. The consistent refusal of the British to realize the potential of mechanization and naval airpower jeopardized their readiness during the 1930s. Despite experiences of cavalry against tanks in World War I, Britain continued to cling to the horse cavalry until early in World War II.[28]

Viewed in a larger context and over time, most changes are evolutionary; but their defining moments are often associated with dramatic events. These milestones lead to contradictory forces that affect bureaucratic organizations. First, organizations react by closing ranks and seeking refuge in longstanding procedures. They thus reinforce a shared reluctance to confront information that contradicts the organization's norms and beliefs.[29] At the same time, the organization is faced with powerful external demands to reform and restructure. In democracies, these come from the civilian leadership that funds military operations. The pressures accelerate in the wake of a major mission failure (actual or perceived) by the organization. Following a major success, however, the organization is more risk averse, preferring to rely on proven tactics, techniques, force structures, and technologies. Thus, after such victories as World War II, the Persian Gulf War, or the end of the Cold War, the military has proven itself and is reluctant to accept change regardless of how little relation future challenges may have to the past.[30] Therefore, the military proves unprepared for a limited war like Korea or for modern peacekeeping and peace-enforcement.

DOD

There is some truth in the cliché that armies prepare to fight the last war. Victory constrains rather than frees the victor, and complacency becomes the rule. "In theory," Norman Dixon stated, "a major war should confer benefits on the armed forces of the victor. New lessons have been learned, new technologies developed, and new confidence found. Thus equipped, they should have a head start on preparations for the next war. In practice, the reverse seems to be the case." [31]

It would appear that without external pressures, the military will normally only overcome inertia and move toward change after failures like Korea or Vietnam. Even in such cases, the type of change needed may only be resolved by external political pressure. But the impetus for change is not limited to the debate among national security decisionmakers. In most contemporary cases, the civilian leadership has capitalized on proposals made by officers on the operational level. The rise of Special Forces is frequently credited to President Kennedy. Early Special Forces doctrine and force structure resulted from a clash in the 1950s that operational level officers had with the prevailing doctrine of massive retaliation. Special Forces, it was argued, was an essential element for reacting to challenges all along the conflict spectrum.[32]

education can provide an understanding of innovations and their full implications

In the interwar years junior officers on the operational level proposed changes in doctrine, force structure, and technology. Despite some initial success, those who argued for change after victory often suffered isolation, discredit, and in the extreme, elimination from military service. In Britain, J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart were shunned and condemned by mainstream soldiers for advocating mechanization. It was the endorsement of outsiders such as Winston Churchill that kept these ideas in the forefront even when Fuller was forced to retire.[33]

Brigadier General William ("Billy") Mitchell was an airpower prophet without honor. Like his doctrinal mentor, Giulio Douhet, he faced court martial. American airpower gained ascendancy because of an overwhelming tide of events and political pressure, combined with the realization by the Army and Navy that both would benefit. Mitchell did not live to see this.[34] Liddell Hart wrote that even success of a new idea ultimately costs its advocates. A wall of "obstruction compounded of resentment, suspicion, and inertia" builds up to block the advocates of new ideas. "As the wall finally yields to the pressure on the new idea it falls and crushes him." [35]

This cannot be blamed on individuals. It is the collective pressure of military organization and bureaucratic norms. "It seems quite possible," one critic noted, "that, as well as being agents of change, modern complex organizations are equally well suited and disposed toward suffocating it." [36] Such barriers have been countered by leadership and support on levels above the operational commander. The recovery of the military from Vietnam was largely due to leadership initiatives at the highest levels. This is consistent with research

which shows militaries generating reform internally in the wake of failure.[37] But the success of Grenada and Panama did not hinder force modernization that led to success in the Gulf War.

There are lessons to draw from America's interwar experience. While Mitchell suffered for his advocacy, some survived. George Patton, Dwight Eisenhower, and others championed many of the ideas in America which Fuller and Liddell Hart advanced in Britain. The period between the wars was marked by slow promotions and dismal assignments, but when war came they appreciated the value of their earlier vision.[38] They benefitted from innovative study at staff and war colleges, opportunities to write, and mentors like Major General Fox Conner, the Army chief of staff during World War I. Not all achieved wartime prominence. But America had an able cadre of innovative officers to assign as operational commanders when World War II broke out.[39]

Organizational barriers can be overcome, but not without costs. The recurring patterns for successful change include:

- willingness by the innovator to take professional risks
- awareness of the need for bureaucratic mentors and allies
- awareness of, and involvement in, innovation initiatives by higher military and civilian leadership
- patience with organizational inertia on the part of those advocating change
- patience with those advocating innovation on the part of the bureaucracy.

For operational commanders there are several imperatives for ensuring effective change. First, they must understand their psychological strengths and limitations as well as those of their subordinates. Contending with individual barriers to change requires not only knowing obstacles that exist but how to overcome them. While traits such as openness and risk acceptance are not easily learned at an advanced age and career status, education can provide an understanding of innovations and their full implications. Second, it is not enough to master mainstream doctrine and practices. The school solution must be constantly challenged. Ideas that threaten an operational commander's own domain may provide the best opportunities for success. Patton declared that his saddest moment was the day his cavalry unit gave up its horses.[40] His personal dismay, however, did not stop him from embracing armored warfare.

Next, openness must be renewed. Innovators in one generation may be the obstacles to the next. Many officers who benefitted as subalterns from the favorable innovations of the late 1930s and early 1940s were obstacles to innovators in the 1950s and 1960s.[41] Fourth, as leaders at the crossroads of innovation, operational commanders can also help to mitigate obstacles presented by organizational limitations. Nurturing ideas and mentoring those willing to adopt and advance them are the responsibilities of operational commanders. The leaders who set the command climate can determine the success or failure of innovation.

Finally, in a profession that requires risk to life and limb, risk to professional status can be no less acceptable. The patience needed to have the mainstream accept important innovations may require falling off the usual path of success. For every Gavin or Patton there is a Fuller or Liddell Hart. Had it not been for World War II (and the retirement of his arch rival, Douglas MacArthur), George Marshall might have capped his career as a colonel advising the Illinois National Guard.[42] In the final analysis, the effective implementation of change starts with the recognition that the operational commander does not train, plan, lead, and fight to ensure the success or failure of any tactic, doctrine, or weapon system. His mission is to prepare and use the Nation's military in the optimal manner to ensure the defense of vital national interests. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] For an overview of the recurring transformation of the American military, see T.A. Heppenheimer, "Build-Down," *American Heritage,* vol. 44, no.8 (December 1993), pp. 34–46.

[2] Operational commanders lead units that conduct—and train others to conduct—operational level warfare.

[3] Relevant works include Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

[4] Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker, *Communication of Innovations: A Cross Cultural Approach* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. 7.

[5] Other types are optional decisions (those reached regardless of the decisions by the social system) and collective decisions (those made by consensus). See Rogers and Shoemaker, *Communication*, pp. 36–38.

[6] Rick Waddell, "The Army and Peacetime Low Intensity Conflict, 1961–1992: The Process of Peripheral and Fundamental Military Change" (unpublished paper, 1992).

[7] Rogers and Shoemaker, *Communication.*

[8] A thorough study of this period is found in Chris C. Demchak, *Military Organizations, Complex Machines: Modernization in the U.S. Armed Services* (Ithaca, N.Y.:

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Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 41–61, 164–66. Based on the author's experience in Europe, 1980–84.

[9] Eliot A. Cohen, "The Mystique of U.S. Air Power," *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 73, no. 1 (January/February 1994), pp. 114–15.

[10] Wayne Maynard, "The New American Way of War," *Military Review*, vol. 73, no. 11 (November 1993), pp. 6–8.

[11] "As any seasoned hand well knows, the crystal-clear so-called military model—give an order and get instant compliance—doesn't even hold for the military." Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 90–91.

[12] Norman F. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 346; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), pp. 467–69.

[13] Posen, *Sources*, pp. 105–40.

[14] T.B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), pp. 132–66; William F. Halsey and J. Bryan III, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947).

[15] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922/1960), p. 16.

[16] Roger Hilsman, *The Politics of Policy Making in Defense and Foreign Affairs: Conceptual Models and Bureaucratic Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987), pp. 45–46.

[17] Robert Jervis, "Political Decision Making: Recent Contributions," *Political Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 1980), pp. 98–100; Deborah Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 50–52.

[18] Larson, *Origins*.

[19] James M. Gavin, *Airborne Warfare* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), p. 140.

[20] James M. Gavin, *On to Berlin* (New York: Bantam, 1979).

[21] Gavin, *Airborne*, pp. 140–60; see also Gavin's *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1958) and *Crisis Now* (New York: Random House, 1968).

[22] Rogers and Shoemaker, *Communication*, pp. 347–85.

[23] John Toland, *No Man's Land: 1918, The Last Year of the Great War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), p. 130.

[24] Eisenhower, *Crusade*, p. 449.

[25] Gavin, *Space Age*, pp. 155–57.

[26] In addition to Weber, most other students of bureaucracy use the military as an example of this organizational type. See James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 3–6, 15–18.

[27] Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 174.

[28] Dixon, *Incompetence*, pp. 111–18.

[29] Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), pp. 174–77.

[30] Waddell, "The Army."

[31] Dixon, *Incompetence*, p. 110.

[32] One of the few published accounts of the little chronicled "colonels' revolt" is found in David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 573–79. Personal reflections by two key participants are in Maxwell D. Taylor, *Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1960), pp. 23–79; and Matthew B. Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), pp. 266–73, 286–94.

[33] Dixon, *Incompetence*, pp. 112–14.

[34] Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 223–41.

[35] Dixon, *Incompetence*, p. 114.

[36] Robert Presthus, *The Organizational Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978).

[37] Posen, *Sources*, pp. 221–28; Waddell, "The Army."

[38] Joseph I. Greene, editor, *The Infantry Journal Reader* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1943) includes works by Patton, Stillwell, Chennault, Marshall, and others written when they were young company and field grade officers between the wars.

[39] Halberstam, *Best and Brightest*, pp. 390–91.

[40] Dixon, *Incompetence*, p. 118.

[41] See Krepinevich, *Vietnam*, pp. 4–7.

[42] William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Litle, Brown and Company, 1978), p. 157.